

When *Bad Things* Happen to Good Clubs

By Craig Harrison, DTM

All clubs experience bumps and bruises over time. They are prone to the effects of economics and egos, logistics and fluctuations in quality. Over time, the membership of most clubs waxes and wanes. Yet some clubs experience particularly tough times. The question arises: What to do when bad things happen to good clubs?

For the record, I believe all Toastmasters clubs are inherently good – they are formed to serve the needs of their members, to help them learn, grow and build confidence. There is no such thing as a bad club. There are merely clubs that are underperforming or under-serving the needs of their members.

All clubs – even the best of them – need a blend of resiliency and resourcefulness to stave off the bad things that can happen. Don't think your club is immune to such challenges. The only question is how your club will respond to challenges posed by any of the following situations.

Location, Location, Location

About four years ago, AT&T clubs throughout North America were suddenly faced with a loss of onsite meeting space because of a policy change. A combination of communication, leadership and public relations strategies resulted in a recommitment to provide secure meeting space for these clubs.

So how stable is your meeting location? Are you regularly in touch with your landlord or site contact? Nurture that relationship in good times to protect yourself from changes in policy or sentiment toward your club. Demonstrate your club's value to your host organi-

zation's human resources department and upper management. Remind them that great things are happening in the club and that the club adds value to their organization, neighborhood and community. You may be able to avert disasters related to logistical challenges with a little planning and communication.

Here are a few difficulties your club might face:

- You lose your primary location (sometimes on short notice).
- You're forced out of your regular meeting room and possibly downgraded to a less popular location.
- Your members might be forced to register, in advance, for each meeting as a result of security concerns.
- Your company (a primary source of members) relocates, downsizes or closes – stripping your club of talent and mass.
- Your club becomes too big, outgrowing its location or delaying the growth of some members wishing for more opportunities to participate.

Solution: Have a backup or emergency plan in case, on short notice, your site is unavailable for one or more meetings.



Ego, Ergo They Go

Sometimes strong personalities within a club will lead to attrition of members over time. Even healthy clubs lose members when a particular member's dominant personality or overriding style drowns out other members' voices. And don't think it's only the club president who can have this effect.

I've been in a club where an overaggressive multilevel marketer used the club as a platform for growing her business. This led to sales speeches, unwanted sales phone calls and emails. Thus, the club environment was poisoned for many members. When club leaders were slow to address it, several members quietly left. Only later did the club realize why it was losing members.

One club I visited was highly politicized. It had developed a political agenda based on local and national parties and propositions. Visitors soon realized this club was far from neutral in terms of its leanings concerning politics. Guests either fell in line or felt the wrath of members who weren't shy about espousing their prevailing beliefs and attempting to persuade visitors and new members. As a result, this club's membership remained constant; there was little growth. Only its true believers felt comfortable.

Solution: *With the exception of some clearly designated specialty clubs, Toastmasters clubs should be open to people of all races, religions and orientations – inclusivity is the key. Whether through speeches or Table Topics, members and guests should not feel the need to adhere to others' belief systems or politics. Nor should they be sales targets. Club leaders should make regular announcements to address this issue and should discuss the importance of evaluating a speech's writing and delivery – not necessarily its content.*

A Leader Runs Through It

Bad things can happen as a result of leadership challenges. On occasion, a club will suffer from an overbearing immediate past president who is reluctant to let go of a club's culture or allow new leaders to modify its structure or operation.

I've seen specialty clubs, whose officers are elected for one year at a time, re-elect their president for a second year. Members will tolerate a leader they're not enamored with for one term, but two consecutive terms is more than many will endure. Without fanfare they will withdraw or transfer their membership. I've always felt the strength of a club comes from the diversity of its members – their styles, thoughts, opinions and skills, and the rotation of leaders

each term. Too much of any one member may inhibit others from expressing their excellence.

Sometimes a power struggle or battle of styles will occur between officers. When it goes public it can divide the club; some people side with one officer while other members support the opposition. Polarizing members with “political” friction leads to fissures and fractures of the club’s cohesiveness. This is definitely not a recipe for club excellence!

On occasion a club leader will browbeat members with rules. Occasionally these club leaders can be so dogmatic that their entire focus on is the letter of the law and they miss the spirit behind the law. They espouse rigid rules – often not official Toastmasters rules – at every opportunity, neglecting the focus that Toastmasters really encourages personal growth and learning in a safe environment.

Sometimes over-ambitious club members and leaders, in their zeal to excel in the Distinguished Club Program,


- The vice president education stopped assigning roles in print weeks in advance.
- The club leaders began to construct the agenda on a flip chart when that day’s meeting had started.
- A few members left and were not replaced.
- Guests were ignored when they visited and didn’t join or return.
- Members failed to show up for meetings and neglected to arrange back-ups to cover their roles.
- Meeting standards declined a little bit each month.
- Members gave impromptu speeches.
- The sergeant at arms stopped stocking the appropriate speech evaluation forms for each assignment.
- Members increasingly arrived late.
- Speakers rarely provided introductions in advance, but scribbled on lined paper right before they were to speak.

An air of informality pervaded meetings. Soon the membership had dwindled to a handful of die-hards, mostly male. The environment resembled more of a men’s club. And thus, a club that was once a model of excellence became a club likely to dissolve within a year without attention and a rededication. That year passed, and the club died.

In communities, quality of life is tied to practices such as repairing potholes in the roads as soon as they appear. The quality of a Toastmasters club is similarly threatened by the incremental diminution of quality in its various practices.

Solution: *Infuse your club with more quality and preparation in its practices, communication, materials and interaction. Then watch it grow!*

It’s Not What Happens, It’s How You React

Bad things may happen to your club. Yet nothing is irrevocable. There are club specialists, coaches and rescue chairs available to assist you in saving your club. Learn more about club coaches by visiting www.toastmasters.org/ClubCoach. Also, veteran members can deliver modules such as “Moments of Truth” to help. Your area governor can also assist. You don’t have to go it alone in your quest to make your club the best it can be, again. 

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focus on empire building and amassing points, to the detriment of human relations. When everything is quantified instead of humanized, a coldness pervades the Toastmasters experience.

Solution: *True leaders are uniters, not dividers. Be sure to elect leaders who further the purpose of the club, its members and Toastmasters International. True leaders recognize that the core of every club is its people.*

The Long Decline

Some clubs suffer from the cumulative effects of many small decisions, each causing a slight decline in quality. Regarded individually, each choice or practice may seem inconsequential. Yet the sum of all these parts leads to an average or below average club experience for members and guests. I call it the curse of mediocrity.

Consider the “Pedestrian” Toastmasters club. This now-defunct group was once Distinguished. At that time it had a nice blend of men and women, and longtime and newly joined members. Their meetings were vibrant and varied. Over time a series of events occurred, each causing a small ripple. For instance:

- The vice president membership stopped leading membership-building campaigns.